

Green Takes on Another Meaning

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Traditional Signs to EXIT in Favour of the Running Man

By Barbara Carss

Pictogram signs could soon point the way to the exit in many Canadian buildings. The 2010 National Building Code, scheduled for release this fall, calls for the green “running man” image and directional arrows in place of the traditional red EXIT or SORTIE signs.

The new format conforms to International Standards Organization (ISO) symbols now commonplace in the European Union and many other countries. National Code developers expect most Canadian provinces and territories will adopt the change, which would mandate the pictogram sign in new construction and major renovations.

“The Provinces are already aware of everything we are doing in the development of the National Code and we haven’t been hearing objections,” observes Philip Rizcallah, Senior Technical Advisor with the Canadian Codes Centre at the National Research Council. “The Code is coming out in November and we believe within a few months after that many of Provinces are going to adopt it.”

The 2010 Code will also allow for photoluminescent exit signs – a technology that adherents promote for both safety and energy conservation reasons. Photoluminescent signs absorb and store light at levels as low as 5 lux and, once charged, can provide illumination for several hours in the absence of light. They can function in combination with conventional or emergency lighting without having to be wired into a power system, and they require negligible maintenance because there are no bulbs to replace.

“From a safety perspective, it is a redundant, fail-safe system. If every other system fails, photoluminescent technology will continue to glow,” says Michele Farley, a fire safety consultant and Chair of the advisory committee for the development of the CAN/ULC-S572 standard for Photoluminescence and Self-Luminous Signs and Path Marking Systems referenced in the 2010 National Building Code.

FLEXIBILITY FOR FAIL-SAFE TECHNOLOGY

In the United States, jurisdictions like New York City mandate photoluminescent markings in stairwells and/or other passageways that building occupants might have to navigate in emergency situations, and Canadian Code developers predict that path marking systems will be addressed in the next cycle of the National Building Code to be released in 2015. In the interim, CAN/ULC-S572 ensures that any voluntary installations comply with appropriate safety standards.

“It’s important that designers be able to specify products that will meet performance requirements,” Farley explains. “It is opening the door for designers, architects and engineers to find ways to use the technology. Photoluminescent path marking will be a supplement that will be used by designers in ensuring fail-safe buildings.”

Code and safety specialists suggest that, at least initially, most of the new pictogram signs are still likely to be hardwired and illuminated from within. The signs’ dimensions will be similar to traditional EXIT signs and should fit into comparably sized spaces.

However, photoluminescence can provide more flexibility in awkward configurations because signs can be flush with walls where they may be less likely to be knocked or damaged. The technology is also compatible with Braille and other types of tactile signs that can be mounted in more accessible locations.

“The EXIT sign is where? On top of the door. If you’re blind, that’s not really helpful,” says Rob Brooker, President and proprietor of Signaids, a company specializing in ISO standard pictograms and signs to promote accessibility.



He applauds the National Building Code's adoption of the running man pictogram, which is in keeping with the Access for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. "Every province and territory has agreed to that so Canada, as a nation, is bound to implement it," Brooker notes.

He advocates the full range of ISO safety related pictograms, which also apply a consistent colour code of green for safety and red for danger – arguing, for example, that it is much easier for anyone to see and grasp the image of a fire extinguisher than to read the letters in vertical order as they now appear on wall-mounted cabinets.

"The whole premise of the ISO signage or a pictogram is to enable people to quickly identify a sign," Brooker says. "The whole basis is that safety signs all look the same. Therefore the continuity is there."

SWITCHOVER FACTORS

The Canadian Commission on Building and Fire Codes' rationale for the running man pictogram is largely to harmonize Canadian standards with international trends. However, there are spinoff benefits of greater inclusiveness for people with limited literacy in English or French and potential cost savings for building owners who previously had to source bilingual EXIT/SORTIE signs.

"We are hearing some concerns and one of the issues that has been raised from some of the jurisdictions is that this is going to confuse people," Rizcallah acknowledges. "We expect people will adapt quickly. There is not much of a learning curve on this."

The pictogram will create a few more details for building designers to think about, though, since they will have to specify the appropriate directional arrow for each sign – left, right, up, down. Manufacturers will likewise have to produce a wider array of products, and this will also necessitate more inventory administration.

"Our business deals with a lot of distributors. They obviously would rather stock a universal model," says Peter Shilling, Engineering Manager with the emergency lighting provider, Beghelli Canada, and a member of an industry advisory committee to the Code developers.

Many Canadian based companies already supply the running man pictogram or other ISO standard signs if a customer requests, but those specially ordered images won't necessarily comply with the new National Building Code. It mandates a standardized image in specific shades of green and white.

"In Europe, there are probably five or six different ISO running men, so they had to choose one, which is ISO 7010," Shilling adds. "Our parent company is in Italy, and the signs in use there are slightly different than what is proposed here."

Safety experts are also concerned that renovations could create some potentially problematic inconsistencies in signage. It may not be so confusing if an entire floor or multiple floors within an existing building are outfitted with running man signs while other entire floors retain the EXIT signs, but Rizcallah speculates that authorities with jurisdiction will prohibit mixing of the two sign formats when major renovations are conducted on the area of a single floor.

"Any building should try to strive for consistency," Farley advises. "EXIT signs are in the background and we probably don't think about them that much, but in an emergency situation you need them really, really urgently and that's not the time you want to worry about clarity."

Manufacturers foresee continued demand for the traditional EXIT signs so owners/managers of existing buildings shouldn't have any imminent worries about finding replacements for individual fixtures. "The general consensus in the industry is that some Provinces won't adopt it and some may be slow on the uptake. We also sell into the U.S. market, which will still use the EXIT sign," Shilling says.

Alternatively, building owners/managers might opt to convert completely to the running man pictogram signs as part of a lighting retrofit. The Code also allows for the hybrid option of the running man pictogram and applicable directional arrow with the word EXIT below.

"It will be a process and it will be years probably before we start to see a significant change," Farley says. "With most code changes, they are like snails and then they are like torpedoes."

For more information, the standards referenced in the 2010 National Building Code are: CAN/ULC-S572, Photoluminescence and Self-Luminous Signs and Path Marking Systems and ISO 3864-1 Safety Colours and Safety Signs Part 1.